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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: BUILDING ON "A COMMON WORD", VATICAN WILL HOST MUSLIM DELEGATION IN THE SPRING FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUECAR

REF: (a) VATICAN 003, (b) 07 Vatican 181 and previous

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Holy See has announced that a delegation of Muslim scholars representing the 138 signatories of "A Common Word" will meet Vatican representatives in Rome this spring for a "historic" dialogue between the two faiths. This is a dramatic development. The Catholics and Muslims involved have shown goodwill and courage in launching a potentially far-reaching dialogue, though both sides are certain to proceed with great caution. End summary.

¶2. (U) Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, gave an interview December 30 to L'Osservatore Romano in which he announced that Catholic and Muslim representatives will meet in Rome this spring to start a "historic" dialogue between the two faiths. The Muslim delegation will come on behalf of the 138 Muslim scholars who signed "A Common Word" (reflets) last fall; the document was addressed to the Pope and other Christian leaders and proposed just such a dialogue. According to Tauran, the agenda for the spring meeting will include human dignity, interreligious dialogue based on reciprocal understanding, and teaching tolerance to young people. The delegation will also meet with other Vatican entities, including the Pontifical Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies (PISAI).

¶3. (U) Tauran also said three representatives of the 138 scholars will come to Rome in February or March to prepare for the spring meeting. Among these three will be Imam Yahya Sergio Yayhe Pallavicini (ref A) and Libyan theologian Aref Ali Nayef. Tauran himself is planning to travel to Cairo in February for meetings with scholars at the famed Al-Azhar university there; he will also travel to Libya to visit the World Islamic call Society, and to Jordan to visit the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Amman.

Comment

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¶4. (C) This is a significant and dramatic development. Just over a year ago, Pope Benedict XVI's relations with the Muslim world were in jeopardy following his Regensburg lecture (in which he quoted a Byzantine emperor's harsh words about the Prophet Mohammed). The Pope regained some ground with his gracious gestures during his December 2006 visit to Turkey. The 138 Muslim scholars who signed "A Common Word" were following up on an earlier letter to the Pope, signed by 38 of them, which was a polite but serious response to the Regensburg lecture. Now there is unquestionable commitment by the Holy See and the Muslim scholars to undertake a long-term dialogue which can perhaps aspire to follow in the footsteps of the successful Catholic-Jewish dialogue begun decades ago. Tauran's journeys to Egypt, Libya, and Jordan are themselves highly significant and should do much to set the stage for an even broader dialogue.

15. (C) While the goodwill and courage of both sides are undeniable, both will proceed with great caution; the desire for dialogue is paramount, but trust can only be developed slowly. The 138 scholars are important, but cannot claim to speak for the entire Muslim world, and even internally they differ on key issues. Similarly, the Holy See is not united on how welcoming to be to the Muslim initiative. The two sides have work to do on defining the terms of reference for their dialogue; for example, some insist that theological dialogue is impossible and that only cultural and ethical concerns can be usefully discussed, while others are more ambitious with regard to doctrine and basic beliefs. Underlying the entire effort, of course, is the unspoken but universally recognized issue of religious violence and terrorism. This theme will probably be addressed only obliquely, given its sensitivity and "political" rather than religious character, but it will influence all discussions.

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